

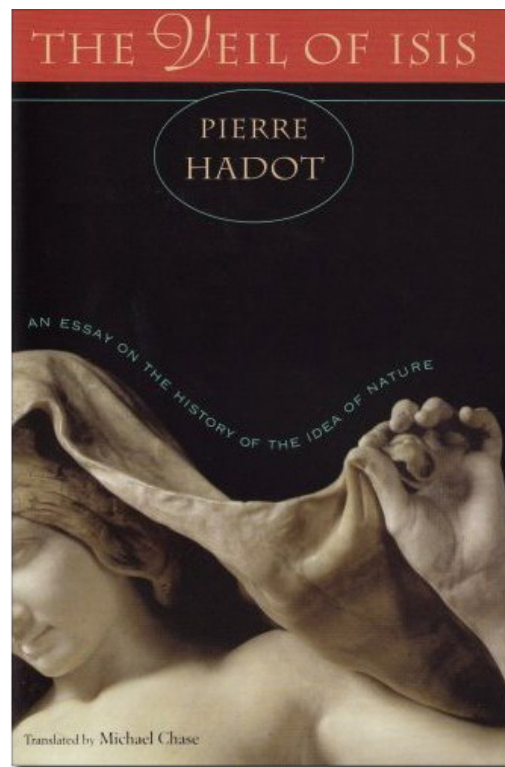
Book Review of The Veil of Isis: An Essay on the History of the Idea of Nature

by Pierre Hadot, translated by Michael Chase (Harvard University Press, 2006)

reviewed by Horst Hutter (Concordia University)

This immensely learned book begins with an enigmatic saying and its context of a religious event. The saying is contained in Heraclitus' famous book, and the event is his deposition of this book as an offering to the goddess Artemis in her temple at Ephesus at around 500 BCE. A mere three words, namely *physis kryptesthai philei*, usually rendered as "*nature loves to hide*," this saying has become a multi-layered subject of contradictory interpretations that have haunted the imagination of the pagan as well as the later Christian periods of Western culture. Indeed, as Hadot demonstrates, the meanings of these seemingly simple words have not yet become fully revealed and probably never will be, despite the efforts of many scholars, *homines religiosi*, and philosophers over 2,500

years. Already at their inception, they permitted of at least several different interpretations, given the fact that the word *physis* could refer to a particular entity in living nature, and only later came to be applied to the whole of the living world, and *philei* had more the sense of "being accustomed to" than "to love." At the most basic level, it thus might simply have meant that everything that comes into existence disappears into death. At the outset then, these words indicated the most mysterious and most frightful aspect of the world, namely the aspect of death, and human ignorance of why there is death, why even "golden lads and girls, like chimney sweeps, must come to dust". More generally, the saying indicates the almost complete lack of human understanding of the mystery of the cosmos, if indeed it is a cosmos. It points to the awesome mystery of time. Due to its ambiguity and its contradictoriness, this saying of Heraclitus, a thinker already known in antiquity as the obscure, has augmented enormously, being the word of a sage which like all words of sages, so Nietzsche held, habitually grow in time in the manner in which crystals grow



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Given the fact that ancient pagan religions had not yet become accustomed to the distinction between “true” and “false” gods, the figure of Artemis became merged with the figures of other female divinities, such as the Egyptian Isis and Neith, the Roman Diana and the Greek Athena. Hadot develops an account of the transformations of this divinity, given the easy translatability between different pagan ethnic cults, which culminates in the image of the veiled figure of the goddess Isis at the Egyptian temple at Sais. He focuses on this figure and the saying associated with it by ancient authors such as Plutarch and Proclus, a saying that is as poetical as it is frustrating, namely: “I am all that has been, that is and that shall be, no mortal has yet raised my veil.” Indeed, the journey undertaken by Hadot in this marvelous book, which contains also a wealth of pictorial reproductions of its thematic, would lead me to conclude that no mortal ever will raise the veil of the goddess. However, it is precisely this impossibility, which has served as a challenge and impetus to the efforts of philosophers, scientists, poets, artists, and homines religiosi. It is as if the divinities were engaged in an effort to educate humans by challenging them to make efforts to understand the world. Hadot discusses the human response to this challenge that has led to astonishing developments in the various sciences of nature. None of these, however, have led us to complete knowledge of the all and the everything. The “mystery of being” remains. This latter phrase is merely the latest Western way of describing the lack of full human understanding of the world. One of the proudest conceits of scientific culture seems to be the idea of progress, in accordance with which the truth, first about aspects of the world, and ultimately the whole world, would become known to us in response to the diligent and patient efforts of successive generations of searchers. Thus, the ancient saying, attributed by Aulus Gellius to an anonymous Roman poet, to the effect that “*veritas filia temporis*,” “truth is the daughter of time,” has enshrined human hopes, as Hadot points out. Nevertheless, all efforts to grasp this elusive “truth” of the whole have led to new challenges, such that one mystery solved has merely led to the revelation of another mystery. The idea of progress may thus partially be an expression of the hubris so evident in technological societies.

Indeed, the histories of science and philosophy would lead one to question the very concept of truth. It may be that everything that mortals, be they philosophers, priests, scientists, prophets, founders of religion, or mystagoges, so far have proudly considered as their “truths,” in terms of which they have instructed and condemned other mortals, has merely been a series of errors, perhaps frequently also a strategy for ruling over other humans. These “truths,” some of which have been longer lasting than others, seem to be life enhancing errors, recalling Nietzsche’s saying that “the truth is the kind of error without which a certain species of life could not live. The value for *life* is ultimately decisive.” (*Will to Power*, # 453). The survey of different understandings of the secrets of nature presented by Hadot would, moreover, lead one to conclude that not all “truths” are equally life enhancing. Recent developments in human truth seeking might even be destructive of a portion, if not even of all of humanity. Hadot points out that the seemingly

unstoppable mechanization of human beings may deprive humans of both soul and body (151). This marvelous text thus envisages the need for a very strong concern with ecology and the absolute necessity for restraining the hubristic aspects of technology by replacing them with a poetic/aesthetic approach to fathoming the mysteries of being. Such an approach would have to involve a “sacred shudder” and a terror before the vastness of divine nature. Goethe seems to be the pattern hero elevated by Hadot for imitation in this regard. In the same vein, a modern book cited with approval is Carolyn Merchant’s, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution*. ”

Hadot’s survey of the idea of nature that spans 2,500 years and that has preoccupied him for 46 years seems to be infused with elements of pagan and neo-pagan theology. These seem to have been missed by the four other reviews of the book that I have read. It is as if Hadot’s discourse, to speak metaphorically, had been set in motion by the goddess at Ephesus who used Heraclitus as her instrument for transmitting in writing to posterity certain understandings that were ancient already 500 years BCE. The myths of the mother goddess have thus provided the mythomotoric that has set in motion a vast series of interconnected and partially competing, overlapping, and contradictory discourses. These many authors, poets, scientists, artists, and philosophers, Hadot being the very faithful, latest witness in a long series of witnesses, have been and are being carried along by the impetus originating from the goddess and her enigmatic words. This mythic impetus also extends to all serious readers of this discourse. Simultaneously, this “discourse,” being mainly pagan, but naturally also involving Judaeo-Christian authors in dialectical opposition to it, appears as the recapturing of a “counter-memory,” a memory often forbidden and partially heretical within the Christian context. It is a subtext of the official text of dogmatic history, implied by it, that constitutes, in a phrase of Warburg, a cultural *Wanderstrasse*, a never completely abandoned, partially secretive and forbidden set of pathways for the journeyings of the human spirit. (Both the term *Wanderstrasse* and the concept of counter-memory are taken from Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, Harvard University Press, 1997). The “truths” enunciated by the many mortals journeying on these byways have the property of not only themselves being merely “relative,” more mere stumbles than firm steps, but they also relativize all other available human “truths,” whether “divinely revealed” or acquired by human strivings. The very existence of such intertextual counter-memories also, however, relativizes the official memories. It might be appropriate to apply to all of these “truths” a notion and a term developed by Plato in the *Kratylos*. There in the context of a discussion of the etymology of the Greek word for truth, *alêtheia*, the term is not derived from the more common sense of *a-lêtheia*, that is to say “unhidden ness,” upon a reading of the alpha as privative. Rather, the word is divided such that it becomes *theia-alê*, that is to say “divine errance” or “divine wanderings” (cf. *Kratylos* 421B). It might seem entirely appropriate to label the entire history of human “truths” as divine errors, as experiments as it were, which would add the theological element to the Nietzschean formula cited above, perhaps more appropriate for Hadot’s book.

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Hadot discusses many different conceptions of the mystery of nature. Thus, the various “divine errors” in conceiving of nature have alternately and often simultaneously involved seeing nature as an object of science or magic, as a work of art or as an artist that creates itself, (reflecting the division between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*). Alternately, nature has been seen as truth and truthful or as deceptive, as the all-mother, as infinite, divine and ineffable, or as spirit unaware of itself, yet also as supremely intelligent and all-knowing, as thrifty or as spendthrift, as one or as multiple, as something that invites and inspires trust, or as something that terrifies, and as a mysterious whole that has hidden dimensions, or as being mysterious in plain sight. Each of these “truths” has also always involved particular dispositions of those human subjects holding them as truths and acting in accordance with their beliefs. Across these great varieties of errance then, the “worldviews” have mirrored different “worlds,” such that the nature of the subjects of knowledge and their actions have been reflected in the objects perceived, that is, the worlds of nature, as seen and shaped by these actions. For the world of nature has not merely been perceived differently, it has also been transformed in the light of these different perceptions. Thus, not only has the modern world “picture” been gradually mechanized, the world itself has also experienced a gradual “mechanization.” One of the striking aspects of the line of discourse engaged by Hadot has been this strange isomorphism between image and reality. It is reminiscent of Hegel’s vision which starts from the premise that the truth is in the whole, involving the interplay between subject and object such that, following an ancient source, “truth is (so Hegel’s definition) the Bacchantic revelry in which no member is not drunk.”

Hadot’s extensive discussion of Platonism and neo-Platonism mentions the important dialogues *Timaeus* and *Critias*. Together these dialogues constitute a comprehensive depiction of the universe. One of the guiding inspirations in this regard seems to be the beginning of the *Critias* in which the two dialogues are described as a microcosm that mirrors the macrocosm of the universe. The microcosm portrayed in this philosophical and poetic opus is presented as a kind of (re-) production that imitates the genesis and structure of the universe. A quote by Hadot from the *Critias* (*Critias* 106A) on page 208 reads: “This God (that is, the world) who once was truly born, and who has just been born once more in our discourse.” This thought is repeated many times in Hadot’s text. It seems to be a guiding inspiration for Hadot as regards the role of the philosopher, that the *Poiêsis* of a philosophical discourse replicates, “insofar as possible,” the *Poiêsis* of the universe. Needless to say that, despite this caveat and perhaps because of this “insofar as possible,” no analysis that employs a correspondence theory of truth, current in analytical philosophy, would be able to grasp the multiplicity of approaches to the secrets of nature. Thus, one reviewer states that Hadot consistently confounds the secrets of mythical discourse that become obvious upon an allegorical exegesis as “doctrines”, with the secrets of nature, which are not doctrines but facts. Accordingly, “the exegete of a poem uncovers a secret *doctrine* hidden there, not by nature, but by the poet. That doctrine may, but need not have anything to do with nature and *its* secrets, which latter are not doctrines at all, but rather things (say distant stars or invis-

ible atoms), or processes (say star formations, digestion, genetic inheritance).” (Alan Kim in *The Notre Dame Review of Philosophy*, 2007.05.06, p.3. The reviewer then lists all the pages in Hadot in which this supposed error is committed, e.g., pp.47, 48, 51, 53, 55, 58, 62, 80, 205, and 251). One might point out that the so-called things mentioned are things specific to a particular, modern scientific worldview. They are not such “things” at all in a worldview informed by magic, nor are they “facts” that in any way are able to lift the veil of Isis. Moreover, the view of truth implied by this critique ignores the personal and subjective element also always involved in any perceived set of “facts.” The book amply demonstrates that there is no science without its presuppositions, that every science reflects an attitude toward nature, as well as a set of methods and investigative practices. Scientific work can only proceed by following guidelines that enable the method, but which cannot be demonstrated by that method. Hadot supports his view by judiciously referring to Wittgenstein who, as is well known, held that certain propositions necessary for the conduct of science, such as the principle of sufficient reason, of the continuity of nature and of its rational order, or the principle of least expenditure, are purely logical a-priori intuitions that “say not what happens but how we must judge” (196). Science too is ultimately “*Arbeit am Mythos*” and never escapes its mythological foundations.

Given the frequency with which Hadot seems to commit what might be termed the presumed “error” of isomorphism (see above) between a human subject’s vision of the world and the reality of this world, it would appear to be rather a central point of his understanding, and not an error at all. Chapter 15 of the book is entitled “The Study of Nature as a Spiritual exercise.” All spiritual exercise, as is evident from this chapter and from Hadot’s other writings on the nature of ancient philosophy, involves a “view from above.” Only by practicing such a vision, am I able to create a comprehensive understanding of the whole universe within myself. In making this effort, I identify with the resulting vision as my *own* vision, which always has a subjective as well as an objective dimension. There is then no “world outside” this vision. This is the world I “create” in myself, and I cannot go outside or behind it. (To be sure, I do not create my world individually ex nihilo; rather, I become acculturated to a worldview that is for me a ready-made given by the generations before me. I merely internalize it and work within it, leaving it as received or augmenting it). Kant’s recourse to a “thing-in-itself” is an empty formula, and is rightly described by Hegel as a “vacuity-in-itself.” The only possible “outside” would seem to be another vision of the whole, either somebody else’s, or one which I might acquire in the future through my struggles and strivings, or even by “divine grace.” Finally, a given particular science renders insights into never more than a part of the whole; it is itself embedded in a specific vision of the whole. Indeed, “no mortal has yet raised the veil of the goddess,” as is amply demonstrated by the contradictory variety and completeness of description of successive world-pictures presented in this book. In the words of Hadot himself: “...scientific certitudes, reinforced by medical successes, are only partial, and therefore relative, visions of reality. Even the doctors of antiquity, with all their ideas that seem false to us, succeeded in curing the sick...” (172).

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It may appear from the above that the book purveys a view of science as an individual endeavor. However, this is not the case. In a section of the chapter that deals with truth being the daughter of time, the progress of science is seen as the work of all humankind and as an infinite task. Quoting from a letter by Goethe to Schiller, Hadot points out: “there is no perception that is proper to all mankind, and mankind is ultimately a merely fictitious subject, (hence) Nature will always continue to hide from human beings.” (179) This then would mean that complete knowledge of Nature, accompanied by absolute certainty, will never be accessible to humans. Therefore, rather than truth being the daughter of time, it is the infinite endeavor of the whole of humankind which is the child of time. Given that every individual is severely limited in time and perspective, Nature will always have it easy to hide from us. “It is only men in their totality who know nature, and it is only men in their totality who live what is human” (Ibid; quoting from two of Goethe’s letters to Schiller dated February 21 and May 5, 1798). The spiritual exercise required for the attainment of a vision of the whole, must include not only a view from above spatially, but also a view from above, meaning from the whole of time and encompassing all of humankind. However, why should I engage in such a futile endeavor of which I know in advance that I can never complete it successfully? In his other publications on philosophy as spiritual exercise, Hadot has described the various models of such exercises made available by the different schools of philosophy in antiquity. The aim of these practices was never just the attainment of theoretical insight, but also always the attainment of a satisfying way of life. Following Plato, we may hence affirm that no human life is fully satisfying, if it does not contain “greatness of soul.” Hadot thus approvingly refers to the famous passage of the Republic (486A) in which it is said that only a soul that never ceases to contemplate the whole of time and being would not contain baseness or pettiness, and by looking down on human affairs from above, would not fear death. (185) In my judgment then, reading this book by Hadot is itself a spiritual exercise, in that the book never loses sight of the entirety of human endeavors to relate to the mysterious whole of reality. In its judicious selection and arrangement of an enormous mass of detailed scholarship, it always refers to the whole and carries the reader along its paths, its *Wanderstrassen*, to an attempt to attain the greatness of soul that went into the writing of this book.

A major difficulty that readers might experience in grasping the arguments of this book is the astonishing wealth of scholarly materials that are integrated into the whole. They are chiefly elucidated in the main text, but a large number of important points are included in its 67 pages of notes. These need to be read together with the text for a full comprehension of the main points of the argument. In other words, speed-reading is not an appropriate approach to this book, intensive study is. Nevertheless, the author has arranged his own journeyings through these pathways of cultural counter-memories in terms of two symbols, derived from classical Greek culture. Accordingly, all human approaches to unraveling the secrets of nature and to fathoming the mysterious whole may be ordered in terms of two fundamental human attitudes and approaches to this quest. The two attitudes are symbolized by the mythical figures of Prometheus and Orpheus. In

Hadot's words: "...we have been able to observe two fundamental attitudes with regard to the secrets of nature: one voluntarist, the other contemplative. I placed the former under the patronage of Prometheus... As far as the other is concerned, I placed it under the patronage of Orpheus." (317).

These two models of human relations to the mysteries of nature were available to philosophers and scientists already in antiquity, and they have continued up to the present, each with its own line of evolution, and its counter striving conjunctions with the other. Each involves its own methods for unraveling the "secrets of nature." The choice between the two is guided by the way humans and nature are conceived and represented, and in the way in which the conception of secrets would guide human action. If humans, in the case of a Promethean attitude, would feel nature and its secrets to be hostile and jealous, there would be opposition between nature and human art. Art in the form of violent intervention in nature, based on human will, would lead to the attempt to develop technologies for controlling nature. It would ultimately involve an attempt to make man "the master and operator of nature." By contrast, if humans, with the Orphic attitude, conceive themselves to be part of nature, then human art would imitate and complement the art already seen to be present in nature. As Hadot writes: "The occultation of nature will be perceived not as resistance that must be conquered but as a mystery into which human beings can be gradually initiated." (92). Frequently Hadot also mentions that both attitudes are legitimate, both oppose, complement and learn from one another, both may exist in the same texts, such as Plato's *Timaeus*, and both may be united in the same philosophers and artists, such as Leonardo, the Stoic Seneca and the painter Albrecht Durer. Hadot then sees the orphic attitude slowly merging into an aesthetic perspective in the thinkers of the eighteenth century, such as Kant, Rousseau, Goethe, Schiller, and the German Romantics in general.

The beginnings of the Promethean attitude may be seen in Hippocratic medicine, which adopted a judicial attitude toward nature, putting nature on trial and questioning nature compellingly. Originally, this would not involve violence against nature, only some force, as is evident from the quote from the Hippocratic treatise on Art: "When nature refuses willingly to hand over the signs (i.e., clinical symptoms) art has found the constraining means by which nature, violated without damage, can let go of them; then when she is freed, she unveils what must be done to those who are familiar with the art" (93, quoting from Hippocrates, *On Art*, XII, 3, ed. and transl. J. Jouanna, Paris, 1990) However, the further development of the Promethean spirit would no longer obey the Hippocratic restriction on not harming, but would involve "putting nature to the torture." Hadot points out that already in antiquity, this would involve vivisection of live human beings, such as criminals condemned to death. At least since Bacon and the mechanistic revolution of the seventeenth century, the judicial investigation of nature has frequently involved large-scale violence against nature and the infliction of irreparable harm and damage on it. Perhaps for this reason, Hadot seems to emphasize the Orphic approach, especially as continued into an aesthetic perspective in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A new merger between the Pro-

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methean and the Orphic spirit would seem appropriate for our age. Such a merger is exemplified by this very book. Hadot is both an eminent philological scientist and a historian of Hellenistic philosophy, but he also symbolizes across his important oeuvre a profound aesthetic perspective, as well as a spiritual *askêsis* appropriate for our time.

Nothing seemingly can stop the advance of the empirical sciences and nobody would or should even want to abolish their undoubted benefits. Their achievements give humans the means for truly “relieving man’s estate.” However, the full benefits of the empirical sciences as *tools* for the construction of a better world, perhaps even a “return to Eden” (to use a phrase of Carolyn Merchant), will only be available, if the elements of violence in technological approaches to mother nature become sublated in a vision of “deep ecology.” The etymological root of the word “mechanical” in the Greek *mechanê* might provide a key idea for the transformation of the mechanical world. *Mechanê* means ruse, and one could suppose that the utilization of *ruse* rather than *violence* in unraveling the secrets of nature might be vastly more appropriate and preferable. The passage from the Hippocratic treatise on art quoted above would provide a guiding idea: nature can be forcefully questioned, but without doing damage. To that end, the philosophical guidance for the conduct of the sciences would have to involve again a therapeutic and healing approach, as exemplified by the teachings of both Plato and Nietzsche. This means that the perspective of the engineer has to be removed from its position of dominance and reduced to a role of useful servitude. In order to achieve such a reversal, philosophers need to renounce their frequently so narrow perspectives and return again to the practices of spiritual *askêseis*. Concluding with Hadot’s own conclusion: “Let us recall Hoelderlin: ‘To be but one with all living things, to return, by a radiant self-forgetfulness, to the All of Nature’; and Nietzsche: ‘To go beyond myself and yourself. To experience things in a cosmic way’” (319).